Assessment and Diversity: A collaborative project between academic staff and learning support staff in a university

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Abstract

Many academic staff members find assessing written work by international students to be frustrating and worrying. "Should I correct the language errors or stick only to the academic topic?", "Should I correct all the errors or only some?", "Should I correct any errors at all?" and "Why doesn't it seem to make any difference to the students' written English, no matter what I do?". Partly because of teachers' frustrations and worries in this area, students' work is often not assessed as effectively as it could be, and feedback is not always particularly useful or effective.

This research analyses a collaborative project between university programme staff and learning support staff working together to address these issues. The research on ESL error correction, criterion referenced assessment, and international students was used as a starting point for exploring how to address these questions successfully. The aim of the project was both to provide teaching staff with tools to use when assessing students' work, and to assist the programme in developing a set of practices that would help them work with international students to integrate more successfully and quickly with their New Zealand learning environment.

Keywords

international students, error correction, written feedback

Introduction

This research has its origin in my experience as a teacher of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), university lecturer and Student Learning Advisor. Over the years, as a university lecturer, I have observed that many university lecturers and tutors (hereafter, 'teachers' or 'teaching staff') are unsure how to provide useful feedback on English language issues to students whose first language is a language other than English (LOTE). In some cases, where the language used by the student serves to obscure rather than clarify their ideas, the teacher may be unsure as to how to provide feedback of any kind; whether regarding content or form. A related issue, more obvious to me in my role as a Learning Advisor, is that teachers often consider students who speak English as an additional language (EAL) to have a 'language' or a 'grammar' problem when, in fact, their problem is that they do not understand the assignment question and they do not understand how to structure a written assignment. Once a student both understands an assignment question and works through how to structure their response to the question, their written English often seems to improve considerably without any other intervention.

It was in order to address these issues that I approached the Media Studies Programme at Victoria University of Wellington and asked them if they wanted to be involved in a small project to try to improve the feedback given to EAL students on their assignments. The focus was on feedback addressed to issues that were perceived by the markers to be English language issues rather than issues related to disciplinary content.

Providing written feedback to EAL students

Comparatively little has been written about how university teaching staff who are teaching in their disciplinary area, but are not trained as ESOL teachers, provide feedback to EAL students on their English language usage. There is a comprehensive literature on providing error correction feedback to ESOL students (that is students who are actually engaged in the formal study of English language). There is also considerable coverage of the issue of providing feedback to tertiary students in general. Issues relating to international students in English-speaking study environments have been investigated by many researchers, but not many have focussed on the issue of how best to provide written feedback to this group of students. The literature in these three areas is briefly covered below.

Error correction studies

Error correction studies seem currently to be focussed on the debate over whether error correction helps or harms students' acquisition of target forms of written English. Amongst researchers who believe error correction is helpful there is further debate and discussion about what form that correction should take. Ferris suggests that the most important issue is whether to provide direct or indirect feedback.

> When an instructor provides the correct linguistic form for the student … this is referred to as direct feedback. … Indirect feedback … occurs when the teacher indicates that an error has been made but leaves it to the student writer to solve the problem and correct the error. (Ferris, 2002, p. 19)

Related to this question is the issue of just how indirect 'indirect feedback' should be. Suggestions range from a sign in the margin next to a line of text to indicate that there is an error somewhere in the line, through lines underneath the text that needs correction, to codes that indicate the nature of the error.

Another question is how focussed does feedback need to be. Ferris (2002, p. 50) suggests that it might be more fruitful, in certain circumstances to focus on certain categories of error, rather than to try to correct all the errors that have been made in a piece of student writing.

Truscott has argued strongly over the last decade (Truscott 1996 to Truscott 2007) that correcting ESOL learners' English errors is not only pointless but actively harmful: '(a) the best estimate is that correction has a small harmful effect on students' ability to write accurately, and (b) we can be 95% confident that if it actually has any benefits, they are very small' (Truscott, 2007, p. 270). Truscott is at pains to point out that he does not doubt that error correction can improve scores on 'artificial' grammar tests (Truscott, 2007, p.270), and that it can improve production of target forms when revising after error correction. However, he regards these results as 'uninteresting' (Truscott, 2007, p. 271), apparently on the grounds that they have little to do with the long-term ability to produce target like forms. Truscott also points out that he is not arguing that all feedback is useless or counterproductive; '[p]rovision of comments on content and clarity … appears to be universally accepted'. Truscott also notes (2007, p.271) that his findings are of obvious interest to teachers, but that they raise complicated issues which he does not intend to address at this point.

Two studies which may be taken as representative of the opposing view and that have attempted to directly refute Truscott's position are Bitchener (2008) and Ellis, Sheen, Murakami and Takashima (2008). Both studies focussed on the English article system. In Bitchener's study students only received correction relating to the targeted errors (Bitchener, 2008, pp.110-11). Ellis et al. were interested in exploring whether there was any difference in efficacy between focussed and unfocussed correction thus one of their groups received correction to all errors and the other received correction only to targeted (article system) errors (Ellis et al., 2008, p. 359). Both Bitchener and Ellis et al. provided direct feedback. Bitchener designed his study to provide only focussed feedback, whereas Ellis et al. set out to test the efficacy of focussed versus unfocussed feedback. Neither study was designed to test the efficacy of direct versus indirect feedback.

One of the barriers to establishing whether corrective feedback works is the problem of time span. Over a relatively short space of time (say a few days) it may be unreasonable to expect to see much improvement. Over a longer span of time (say a year) many factors may have contributed to the improvement in the learners' language, and it is impossible to isolate how much of the improvement may be attributed to error correction feedback. Both Bitchener and Ellis et al. have attempted to tackle this problem. They have also been mindful that the design of their research needs to include a control group: one of the beneficial effects of Truscott's role in this debate has been his insistence on the superiority of evidence from controlled studies (Truscott, 2007, p.257).

Bitchener's study of ESOL students in New Zealand included a control group and was conducted over a period of two months (Bitchener, 2008, p. 109); it was designed not only to test the efficacy of corrective feedback, but also to explore whether different forms of corrective feedback were more or less effective. The study focussed on 'two functional uses of the English article system' (Bitchener, 2008, p. 109). Bitchener concluded that 'written corrective feedback had a significant effect on improving accuracy in the use of two functional uses of the English article system' (2008, p.115).

The study by Ellis et al. of Japanese EFL learners in Japan also included a control group and took place over a 10-week time span (Ellis et al., 2008, p. 360). The study showed that 'written [corrective feedback] can be effective in promoting greater grammatical accuracy in both an error correction test and, importantly, in a subsequent piece of writing' (Ellis et al., 2008, p. 368)

The authors also concluded that there was 'some evidence to suggest that focussed [corrective feedback] may be more effective in the long run' (Ellis et al., 2008, p. 367).

Written feedback studies

Written feedback at tertiary level has been extensively, if somewhat inconclusively, investigated (Shute 2008). Perhaps the most interesting point to note in the current context is how few of the studies have asked whether student characteristics such as age (although see Young 2000), gender, class, ethnic background or language background have interacted with students' use of feedback. One study which skirts this topic but does not focus on it is Carless's study of staff and student perception of feedback in universities in Hong Kong. Although staff and students from all eight of Hong Kong's publicly funded universities were involved in the study, the most in-depth, qualitative data came from Cantonese speaking students training to be teachers of EFL. Carless notes that Hong Kong Chinese students 'do have particular characteristics', although he goes on to say 'the extent to which they differ from other students is sometimes misconceived or exaggerated' (Carless, 2008, p. 221). Carless does not comment on the ethnicity or nationality of the staff who were providing feedback to these students, but it seems reasonable to assume that some of them would, like their students, have been Cantonese speakers from Hong Kong; and others would have had different linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. The focus of this study, however, is not explicitly on feedback given to students of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds from the teaching staff, even although this may have been the situation. Carless (2008) discovered four 'differing perceptions' and two 'similar perceptions' held by staff and students. The staff and students agreed that students found it hard to 'decode' the marking criteria (Carless, 2008, p.227) and that assessment had quite strong emotional aspects to it (Carless, 2008, p. 230. The differing perceptions were that:

- tutors believed that the feedback they provided was more detailed than students considered it to be;

- tutors thought their feedback was more useful than students did;

- some tutors thought students were only interested in grades but the information provided by students did not allow that conclusion to be drawn;

- tutors thought that their marking was fair but students had mixed feelings about this (Carless, 2008, pp. 225-229),

Other studies on students' perceptions of feedback have focused on the need for feedback to provide transferable information (Lizzio & Wilson, 2000, p. 273) that is also transformative. As one of Poulos and Mahony's (2008, p.153) student respondents said: '…feedback needs to be provided to you so you can actually make a change … if you can't make a change from what's provided then it's useless'.

Lea and Street (1998) outlined some of the reasons why feedback from academic staff to students is often neither as transferable nor as transformative as both parties might hope. The kind of comments that staff make are often about lack of argument or structure – as though these concepts are transparent, easily acquired and transferable across disciplines. As Lea and Street say, however

> 'what makes a piece of student writing 'appropriate' has more to do with issues of epistemology than with the surface issues of form to which staff often have recourse when describing their students' writing. That is to say, underlying, often disciplinary, assumptions about the nature of knowledge affected the meaning given to the terms 'structure' and 'argument'. Since these assumptions varied with context, it is not valid to suggest that such concepts are generic and transferable' (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 162).

Lea and Street discussed some of the most significant difficulties that students had in using written feedback:

- what was suitable for one disciplinary field was not suitable for another;

- the writing guidelines students were given covered areas they felt they had mastered but did not explain how to use those skills in relation to a specific discipline;

- students received conflicting advice even within the same courses on issues such as use of the first person pronoun;

- conventions were often 'presented as self-evidently the correct way in which things should be done' (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 164);

- markers' comments could be incomprehensible (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 169).

Chanock's (2000) research into students' understanding of lecturers' comments on assignments led to similar findings. Her research was conducted across disciplines and also found varying interpretation of academic conventions or terms such as 'analysis', and incomprehension on the part of students when faced with markers' comments.

Criterion referenced assessment and matrix marking

Criterion referenced assessment and matrix marking share the hope that transparent criteria and standards will help to address some of the issues noted above, making it easier for staff to provide consistent and transparent feedback and improving both student and staff understanding of the assessment.

Criterion referenced assessment is the solution sometimes proposed to the problem of conflicting standards and cryptic comments from markers. A study by O'Donovan, Price and Rust (2001) looking at the introduction of criterion referenced assessment in a school of business found that, in itself, the criterion reference assessment did not solve all the problems of the type outlined by Lea and Street. The business school introduced an assessment grid and O'Donovan et al. concluded that, using such a grid, there was still plenty of scope for 'subjectivity and multiple interpretations' (O'Donovan et al., 2001, p. 83). They also commented that:

> The grid in its present quasi-scientific form has incorporated too great an assumption about the nature of knowledge to be transferred and our ability to transfer it … [we should perhaps look] at the grid as a process tool, facilitating shared understanding between staff and students, thus playing a key part … in a multifaceted framework of assessment processes (O'Donovan et al. 2001, p.83)

Matrix marking is perhaps more commonly found in EAL teaching situations where an error 'matrix' is used and the marker can refer, often by code, to the error. Ferris (2002, p. 69) gives an example of a simple error code. An example of a highly detailed, coded matrix can be found in the Detailed Marking Code of the University of Calgary. This code, 18 A4 pages long in the version unloaded from the internet, allows the marker to write 'GR-1b' on a student's work with the intention that the student will turn to her version of the code and read 'Make sure that you use prepositions appropriately (e.g., "He walked out of his house, down the street, and into the building. He went into his office, sat down at his desk, and began to work on his paper.")' (The Effective Writing Programme, 1993, GR-1b). Ferris (2002, p. 21) treats the question of whether to use a marking code as a question of how explicit indirect feedback should be. She concludes that current research provides no clear answer to this question.

International student studies

There is a large and growing literature on international students studying in English at universities in New Zealand (Holmes 2004, Johnson 2008, Marshall & Garry 2005, Skyrme 2007)), Australia (Gauntlett 2006, Green 2007, Handa & Fallon 2006), the USA (Alazzi & Chiodo 2006, Nelson 2004, Rhee & Sagaria 2004,), the UK (Morrison, Merrick, Higgs & Le Métais 2005, Ridley 2004) Canada (Zhou, Knoke & Sakamoto 2005) and also in their home countries (Alessa & Al-Malik 1999, Sonleitner & Khelifa 2005)

However most of this literature tends to survey a range of challenges faced by international students and few, if any, studies have focussed on the provision of feedback on English language errors by disciplinary teachers (i.e. non ESOL teaching staff). Johnson's 2008 study of international students in New Zealand provides a good example of the kinds of challenges often outlined in these studies. Johnson says she was disturbed to discover that most of the international students she interviewed reported that in their first year of study they understood only 20 – 30% of what they heard in lectures. Although they often understood the language at the level of the meaning of each word, they could not understand the extended discourse. Students who had been studying for some years estimated that they understood 70 -90% of what their lecturers said. Most students were reluctant to approach their lecturers directly for clarification, nor had they approached faculty international advisors or the student learning support providers. Most students found it difficult to understand assignment requirements, often because they thought the topic was 'too general'; or they did not understand the instructional words such as 'evaluate' or 'discuss'. When they received their grade, the international students Johnson surveyed reported that they often did not understand why they had received a particular grade, usually because there was not much feedback. They thought that they did not receive feedback that could usefully be applied to their next assignment. They also found (as had Lea and Street's informants) that criteria varied so greatly from one course to another that strategies that had been successful in one course might lead to low marks in another.

The project so far

The project is in its initial stages. Earlier this year I spoke to a staff meeting of the Media Studies Programme: my goals were to raise some of the issues of which I was aware, to see how teaching staff responded to those issues, to invite comment from teachers about issues that they were concerned about in this area, and to try to respond to such issues as best I could.

Matters addressed at the meeting

The extent to which EAL students 'problems' were actually English language problems

As mentioned above, some 'English problems' seem to simply disappear once the student is confident that she understands the question and knows how to structure the essay appropriately for the relevant discipline.

What approach to correcting English should markers take?

There are several matters to consider here: should the marker provide a correct version of the word or sentence (direct error correction); should the marker merely indicate where the error is (indirect error correction); should the marker use a code to indicate the nature of the error; and, finally, is there an acceptable level of error, so that some errors should simply be left uncorrected?

What to avoid

Current evidence suggests that is not effective to provide direct error correction for the whole assignment. There is no hard research evidence that this has undesirable results: at this stage, my advice against it is based on a small amount of research evidence (Ferris, 2002, p.19) and on reflection on my own experience as an international student and as a teacher of international students. Although students often seem to find comprehensive, direct error correction reassuring, it seems to be the case that it simply provides more information than they can usefully absorb (cf. Ellis et al. 2008 on unfocussed correction). It was suggested that markers try to avoid making purely stylistic changes to wording that is grammatically correct and accurate as to content (see Ferris, 2002, p. 50). It is very hard for students to distinguish between a correction made because something is 'wrong' and one that is made because the marker thinks her versions 'sounds better'. In general, it is not a good idea to provide a correct version of the error unless the error is really idiosyncratic. A truly idiosyncratic error of language might need to be directly corrected (if the intended meaning can be discerned by the marker).

Some possible strategies

If the marker has chosen only to highlight error, then briefly summarise the nature of the errors at the end of the assignment. E.g. *You have a range of minor English language errors but your biggest problem in this essay has been getting the tense of the verbs right. Please go to Student Learning Support [contact details] and make an appointment with a learning advisor to talk about this*

Focus on only one feature for the assignment – articles, tense, passives etc. If this method is chosen, then it must be made clear to the student that other errors have been deliberately ignored. Students must not receive the false impression that their work is error free.

Another option for limiting the amount of feedback is to give feedback for only one or two paragraphs, and to mark those paragraphs intensively.

Have a system for indicating passages that actually cannot be understand because of grammar/English language problems. Point out that these, effectively, get no marks because if they can't be understood, then they can't be marked.

The programme needs to be consistent about assessment criteria and underlying assumptions about assessment. Make sure assessment decisions are based on the assessment objectives for the assignment, the course and the degree. If a staff member wants to assess in a very different way from other staff members, then the differences should be made clear to students.

The idea of a marking code or matrix was raised and explained. Most of the teaching staff had never used such a marking tool so a range of different codes were provided for them to consider.

Teaching staff reaction and discussion

The three points that were most discussed at the meeting were the question of using a marking code or marking matrix, the reasons for not providing direct corrective feedback on students' work, and some issues around the programme's writing guide.

Teaching staff were interested in the possibilities of a marking code and looked at the various examples that had been brought along, including the simple code in Ferris (2002, p. 69) and the Calgary University code. There was general agreement that the Calgary code was too detailed and that students would not be bothered looking up the codes, even if they were used. Some people were interested in the idea of a simpler code, but several people raised the problem of their own level of grammatical knowledge. Using the kind of ESOL marking codes that are generally available requires an ability to identify grammar errors. Most markers can say 'that sounds wrong and I know it's not native-like'. However, several people at the meeting were unsure that they would be able to perform the grammatical analysis, or use the grammatical terminology to say 'this is a prepositional

error' or 'an article error' (Ferris, 2002, p.67 also makes this point). Some of the participants had not really thought about the fact that EAL students would be used to this terminology and that this kind of information might be useful to them.

The reasons for not providing direct corrective feedback on students' work were discussed. I suggested that too much feedback created information overload for students. Teaching staff were generally sympathetic to this idea. They also appreciated that it would save time for them if they did not provide detailed, direct, corrective feedback throughout the whole assignment. Several people however raised the same objection to focussing on one type of error (focussed feedback) as they had raised to the marking code: their own inability to consistently identify and designate a particular grammatical error. Most teachers at the meeting preferred the idea of 'blitz marking' one section of an assignment.

The issues discussed in relation to the writing guide were twofold. One was a purely technical issue: the guide included a detailed set of examples about how to reference books, journals and other materials used when writing essays. Unfortunately, the examples, while based on the MLA referencing system, were not actually MLA system. This created at least two problems for students using the examples contained in the writing guide. One, if they wanted to reference a type of source which was not exemplified in the writing guide then they had nowhere else to go to find out how to do it. Two, some students, in some courses in the programme, had been penalised for not using 'real' MLA. As part of this discussion I raised the issue of advice along the lines of 'use any referencing system you like as long as you're consistent'. Some of the staff acknowledged that they gave similar advice. The drawback with this advice is lack of consistency in the programme approach, which can be very confusing for some students and also the possibility that sessional staff may not be familiar with all the possible referencing styles and as long as something looks convincing they may find it acceptable. The difficulty with this is, once again, consistency: another marker may well penalise the student for non-standard referencing.

The other issue discussed in relation to the writing guide was its length. The writing guide is very long 16 A4 pages. The sheer length discourages some EAL students with relatively poor English reading skills from reading the guide. Such students tend to think they should save their English reading efforts for their textbooks. I devised a one page checklist based on the advice in the guide. Media studies staff were interested in the checklist and intend to adopt it in 2009.

Follow up with the programme

Some three months after the session with the Media Studies Programme, I went back to follow up, informally, what people thought about the ideas that had been raised. The feedback was along the following lines (at least one person made each of these comments and several comments were made, in one form or another, by more than one person).

- Had never thought about the fact that EAL students might have a different (more technical/grammatical) perception of English and a metalanguage to express that perception whereas, as a native English-speakers, some of the teaching staff had never acquired those metalinguistic skills.
- The checklist was good.
- The idea of an error correction code was useful.
- The writing guide is going to be rewritten.
- It is counterproductive if the marker does all the correction work for the students.
- The students should do the correction work, not the lecturer
- There is no need to mark everything twice
- About a page and a half should be marked intensively

The current plan is that I will present a similar session next year at the start of Trimester One for the tutors who will be working in that trimester; this session may also include some general discussion of marking issues. There is also a suggestion that I will work with the programme Teaching and Learning Committee on the writing guide re-vamp.

Areas for further research

To date, this project has consisted of a pilot project and follow up to that project. In addition to the original research goals of the project: to provide teaching staff with tools to use when assessing students' work, and to assist the programme in developing a set of practices that would help them work with international students, the following issues have been identified:

- Although the original focus of this research was specifically on EAL students, many of the points that were raised about marking the work of these students highlight issues that are related to marking more generally and, in practice, when talking about assessment it may not be possible to maintain a strict division between marking EAL students' work and the work of other students.

- Disciplinary teachers who are not ESOL/EAP teachers may consider that they do not have the skills required to provide focussed or coded grammar or English language feedback.

- This means that their only realistic options for providing grammar or English language feedback seem to be underlining or direct error correction. Teachers also like the idea of 'blitz' or intensive marking. There is certainly a need to explore ways in which non ESOL/EAP staff can give effective grammar or English language feedback. Such feedback needs to be effective for teachers (easy and quick to provide) and students (comprehensible, useable and leading to improved English writing skills).

- Finally, as Truscott points out, no one has ever suggested that comments on content and clarity were not potentially helpful to students. One fruitful avenue for research would investigate how such comments could be used to help EAL students focus on writing clearer and more target-like English.

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